



# Some Crops Do Better Underwater

BY ROBERT CHEATHAM

When people think of Ventura County agriculture, the images that come to mind are often row crops, orchards, and farmers tending their produce. The thought of any crop being underwater is almost universally bad news, except for one of our County's most lucrative and least-known crops – uni.

For the uninitiated, uni (pronounced ooh-nee) is a tasty delicacy harvested from sea urchins. Prized like caviar in Asian cultures, it is actually the yellowish-orange gonad of the urchin. Ironically, the beginnings of this local crop stemmed from a State-sponsored effort to eradicate them in the 1970s.

You see, urchins at one time were rapidly decimating the Channel Islands' kelp forests, and divers were paid a hefty bounty for each one they could smash with a hammer on the seabed. Rather than being prized as a valuable crop, they were seen as a parasite destroying a scarce natural resource.

As this effort became public, enterprising auctioneers in Japan's sushi markets realized the rare quality of our area's urchins and created a demand for them. Though they can be found in most of the world's oceans, the urchins in our local waters are of exceptionally high quality, taste and texture. The unique ecosystem off our coast enjoys tremendous biodiversity as deep Northern Pacific waters mix with warmer currents from the south.

The logistics of harvesting uni are a delicate balance of factors that any rancher would appreciate. These factors include labor prices, crop quality, spoilage, pressure from competing markets, and most of all weather – including wind, rain, tides, and currents. Adding to the downward pressure on profits are State-enforced fishing limits which have waxed and waned over the past few decades.

As independent contractors, divers are truly at the whim of mother nature. On a good day, they may bring home a \$1,000 harvest. But bad days often outnumber the good. You can't dive on windy or rough days, and the urchins are very susceptible to changes in water temperature or pollution. The divers deliver their bounty to wholesalers like Ventura's Hashimoto Seabridge Inc.

Owner Kan Hashimoto explained to me that divers are paid by the pound for their raw urchins – often in large 150-pound nets. Uni represents only 5% of the urchin itself. What's more, the wholesaler can't examine every pound of sea urchin before paying the diver. So essentially, he buys 150 pounds of raw product sight unseen, knowing full well that only seven pounds of it is worth trying to harvest, and far less than that will be truly marketable to the consumer.



The sushi industry is exceedingly picky on what constitutes high-quality uni. Only the best yellowish-orange shades and crescent-shaped pieces of uni command top prices in Japan's auction houses. This means a trained and discriminating eye has to separate the good from the bad in each net that divers deliver. Another challenge is that uni truly is a fragile crop which can literally melt and fall apart if improperly handled.

With the advent of overnight express firms in the 1980s, it became practical as well as profitable to deliver ice-packed flats of uni from Ventura to Tokyo's auction houses within a 24 hour window. The very highest quality flats – with merely a pound or two of uni – would command prices in the hundreds of dollars. The highest bidder would then wire those funds back to Ventura, just days after the urchin had been on the ocean floor.

Fortunately, this new ability to air-freight uni to Tokyo's markets coincided perfectly with the boom of the Japanese economy. For many years, it was a symbol of status and achievement for Japanese businessmen to dine at expensive sushi bars and spend hundreds of dollars per plate on such delicacies.

Unfortunately, Japanese purchasing power today is a pale shadow of what it was a decade ago. Though the economy has rebounded somewhat, today's status symbols are flat screen TVs and expensive cars, not expensive dining. The supply is still sitting off our shores, but the demand in Japan has waned, along with increasing pressure by cheap uni imports from South America.

Perhaps one day uni will regain its popularity in Tokyo's restaurants. In the meantime, local divers and wholesalers continue to harvest it for delivery to the growing number of specialty Japanese markets in cities like Gardena, San Francisco and Seattle. It provides a valuable lesson in supply and demand, and a perfect example of why there's always some new dimension to this thing we call agriculture.

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